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Elegant Attack On A Complex Communist

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A new book on the controversial Spanish communist leader Santiago Carrillo is a well-crafted hatchet job. But it doesn't tell the whole story, says Tom Sibley

The Last Stalinist: The Life of Santiago Carrillo, by Paul Preston (Harper Collins, £30)

In his early 20s Santiago Carrillo (1915-2012) was a leading figure in the Spanish civil war and from 1960-82 general secretary of the Communist Party of Spain (PCE). From the 1960s he became a powerful advocate of Eurocommunism and increasingly critical of the Soviet Union and the world communist movement.

On the face of it, then, plenty of meat for a biographer to chew on. With his deserved reputation as an outstanding historian and self-confessed man of the left, Paul Preston, who knew Carrillo, would seem to be the ideal person to tell that story.

Unfortunately Preston has chosen to do an elegant hatchet job rather than present a rounded picture.

Carrillo was in the leadership of the PCE during extraordinarily difficult times. Throughout the Franco dictatorship from 1939 to 1975 the PCE was by far the strongest organised opposition. In the face of intense and brutal repression and despite many tactical errors the opposition kept the struggle alive and the ideas of democracy, socialism and communism were never driven out of Spain.

All this was against the background of the cold war and the consequent support, whether tacit or explicit, given to Franco by the imperialist powers. For much of this period Carrillo's role was positive and yet Preston concentrates almost exclusively on mistakes and alleged acts of betrayal.

Franco died in 1975 and Carrillo and the PCE went on to make an important and probably decisive contribution to the construction of a modern liberal democratic state. These are enormous achievements, which receive insufficient recognition in Preston's account.

Many mistakes were made along this tortuous road. Preston places the blame for them solely at Carrillo's door and, in essence, the book is about his alleged betrayals. At every turn Preston finds reasons to castigate Carrillo politically and morally — apparently he could do no right and his thirst for personal power turned him into a calculated murderer and servile puppet of the Soviet Union as well as a betrayer, and possible murderer, of his first wife — a rumour that Preston fails to corroborate.

Even more extraordinary is the claim that Carrillo betrayed his father, a leader of the PSOE — the Spanish Socialist Party — following the anti-government coup led by the Spanish republican army colonel Segismundo Casado in early 1939.

This coup, encouraged by Franco and supported by anarchist militia forces and other leading socialist politicians, led to the killing or imprisonment of thousands of communists and other republicans who remained loyal to Juan Negrin's anti-fascist government.

In the naive belief that a deal could be done with Franco and to avoid demotion or dismissal by Negrin, Casado played the anti-communist card. His actions ensured that Franco could enter Madrid unopposed a few weeks later.

Carrillo's father was appointed by Casado to head up internal security in Madrid. His job was to hunt down communists.

Is it any wonder then that Carrillo should have denounced his father for acts of treachery against the republic and what amounts to murder of many of his comrades?

Without Casado's coup, it was just possible that the remnants of Negrin's people's army could have held out until war broke out in Europe, thus immensely weakening Franco and opening up possibilities to end the non-intervention policy of Britain and France.

Preston has a deserved reputation as a leading historian of the Spanish civil war and, from an unwavering anti-fascist and anti-Franco perspective, he has written with great insight, always backing his arguments with appropriate evidence and references.

One can argue with some of his judgements, particularly when they concern the role of the Soviet Union, the only country other than Mexico

to give unstinting support to republican Spain, or the crushing of the insurrectionary forces of the ultra-left when they turned their weapons on the republican authorities rather than on Franco's army.

But you cannot but admire the quality of the scholarship of his previous writings, nor doubt his intellectual courage when he describes George Orwell — darling of the academic establishment and sections of the left — as a bit-part player whose *Homage to Catalonia* can be likened to Spike Milligan's *Adolf Hitler: My Part in his Downfall*. And Preston denounced Ken Loach's film *Land and Freedom* as an anti-communist tract rather than an account of the anti-fascist struggle.

In a recent interview Preston concludes that the PCE's policy during the civil war was the only sensible one and that Carrillo "did a very good job" as a leader of the United Socialist Youth, which provided the bulk of the rank-and-file of the republican armed forces.

This enormous achievement is quickly passed over in the book while several paragraphs are devoted to the alleged betrayal of the PSOE leader, the abject sectarian Largo Caballero, and the use of Carrillo's leadership position to supposedly create a personality cult.

In a recent interview in *The Volunteer*, Preston outlines his political journey from believing in the 1960s that the ultra-leftist POUM and anarchists were romantic heroes — a position he stresses that he does not hold now — to one where, surprisingly, he "has become readier to see good and bad on both sides," including the fascists.

Unfortunately, this apparent concession to even-handedness does not stretch to Carrillo, who for much of his life was a courageous leader of the anti-fascist movement.

For this, he deserves honour and this is how he should be chiefly remembered — whatever his weaknesses, bad judgements and unprincipled, self-interested political manoeuvres.

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